



Colorado **Counseling** Center

*Relationships can Hurt. Relationships can Heal.*

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## *The Emotional Volume - Turn it up or turn it down?*

Having been married for a number of years now, my wife and I know that we have different preferences about how high the volume should be when we're listening to the radio or watching something on television. In fact, it's become a joke between us; she likes to make fun (in good humor) of me when I turn on the subtitles "for the hearing impaired" when we're watching a movie together.

As common as this trivial struggle over the volume may be for couples, it also plays out on a much more important level: the struggle over the "emotional volume" in the relationship. When we're not feeling understood or valued in our most important relationships, we tend to react by either:

1. **"turning up" the emotional intensity** (trying to reestablish a connection or make ourselves heard), or
2. **"turning down" the emotional intensity** (trying to protect ourselves or keep things from getting too volatile).

### **How do you cope when you're not feeling understood or valued in your relationships?**

The following statements may help you distinguish which category fits your reactions better:

When I'm not feeling safely connected, I tend to **"turn up" the emotional intensity** by:

1. Pushing for the other person to see my point of view.
2. Insisting that we have to talk, even when the other person doesn't want to.
3. Getting upset, yelling, or escalating the emotional intensity, in my increasingly desperate hope to be heard.
4. My partner sees me as blaming, attacking, critical, or nagging — but underneath all of that, I'm really longing for connection and reassurance.

If those statements don't fit your style of reacting, perhaps the following statements are a better description of how you attempt to **"turn down" the emotional intensity**:

1. I quickly become defensive, or I stay cold and logical, trying to keep any intense emotions at bay.
2. I withdraw physically from the conversation, or shut down from responding to the other person.
3. I quickly "agree" with the other person — but it's mostly to placate him/her and to avoid any further contention.
4. I experience my partner as demanding, overwhelming, and hurtful.
5. I feel like nothing I say or do will really help, so why try?

It is easy to see how this struggle over the emotional volume can quickly escalate, with one person becoming ever more intense and the other trying all the harder to shut the emotions down. This sort of struggle, when repeated very often, can begin to create intense feelings of discouragement, loneliness, anger, fear, and resentment—*especially* in marriage, where we need to know that we are safe with each other.

If you've found yourself and a loved one engaged in this struggle, it is probably clear to you that this negative, self-reinforcing cycle needs to change. Here are a few suggestions to help you begin the process:

1. Recognize your own reactive tendency to "turn up" or "turn down" the emotional intensity.
2. Be curious – think about how your reaction can reinforce an undesirable reaction from the other party (and vice versa).
3. Get compassionate; try to understand what your deeper needs are, underneath the way you react. For example, you might be "turning up the emotional intensity" to close the gap between you and your spouse, to fight for connection. Or, your efforts to "turn down" the emotional intensity might really be about trying to feel safe in the relationship, or about a fear that what you say won't be valued or heard.
4. When you feel your typical reactions coming on, pause. Slow down for a few moments, and try to either lighten-up on the intensity, or remain engaged without shutting-off from the other person.
5. In a calmer moment, try to come to the other person and first describe how you value your relationship, and share your thoughts about how your reactions seem to feed into each other. This pattern of reactivity, this "struggle over the emotional volume", is getting in the way of your connection, in the way of your partnership and feeling of unity. Suggest that if you can both come together to work on identifying and de-escalating this struggle, you'll both feel more understood, valued, and connected.

If this seems like a tall order, don't despair. A good therapist who has training in Emotionally Focused Therapy will be able to help you through these tricky things, so that the primary emotions you experience with those you love will be characterized by safety, love, acceptance, and belonging.

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